

LIFE'S LIKE THAT By FRED NEHER



"Don't worry about my age... I can spade a garden if you can stand running off to a luncheon every day!!!"

A Closer Look By Ernest Kreiling

HOLLYWOOD—After eight years Gunsmoke has probably replaced the bath as America's favorite Saturday night tradition.

A few years ago Gunsmoke was the most popular western out of a total of 35 on the air. In the fall it enters its ninth year with competition from only four others, Rawhide, Wagon Train, and the Virginian.

Gunsmoke's perennial popularity is a tribute to producer Norman MacDonnell and writer John Meston, who in creating Gunsmoke pioneered the so-called adult western for television.

IN SPITE of skeptics who thought horse operas were only for the Saturday afternoon capitalist trade, the two men combined authenticity with a respect for the history of this brief episode in America's frontier to bring a basic entertainment form to television. Although the western had been a part of American folklore since Owen Wister's novel, "The Virginian," and since William S. Hart immortalized the cowboy on film, the closest thing to a real western television had seen was Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy.

The twist that affected the course of television entertainment was the "adult western" a term MacDonnell said they originally used to connote the possible audience and the intended authenticity, not necessarily the content.

THERE'LL always be a western," MacDonnell said, because when written in the proper idiom, the western has an appealing honesty, strength and simplicity."

What was so new about Gunsmoke eight years ago? "Much of it was a matter of authenticity. For example, we didn't give Matt's horse a name. A horse in those days was simply a means of transportation, and men had to rely on more than one. We had our actors fire only five shots from their six-shooters, since most men kept the hammer closed on an empty chamber. We had an idea that someone ought to knock the Marshall around once in a while. He not only wasn't superman, he wasn't always impressed with the idea of being a lawman. And, of course, Kitty wasn't exactly the pure little girl in blue jeans from next door. In other words, there was a certain reality about the people and situations."

"HAVE THE characters in Gunsmoke changed much in eight years?" I asked MacDonnell. "They've changed a lot and not in a way I particularly like. Matt was more human then, and not nearly the shining symbol of law and order he's become. Doc was more of a quack, and spent more time in the Long Branch. Kitty, well, Kitty's morals were considerably more in doubt than they are now. "I personally would like to see us put a little more bite into their personalities. They've all become bland, so terribly pure and righteous," MacDonnell continued. "But these changes just happened, slowly and without our being aware of it. Although I don't particularly like everything that's happening to Matt, Doc, Kitty and Chester (he'll be back for at least 10 episodes next season), we don't plan any changes in them or in format."

BEFORE VISITING with MacDonnell I had visited one of the ranches Hollywood uses for "location" shooting, and watched Jim Arness film a scene for an upcoming sequence.

Standing next to a campfire in the middle of the prairie, Matt Dillon says, "If you're going to shoot me, you'll have to shoot me in the back." He turns his back to the hombre. Short pause. Then in a deft movement Matt spins and fires. Dillon is hit in the leg, but the other critter is dead. Dillon, his face grimacing with pain, crawls awkwardly toward the camera. Cut.

I estimate this scene to be part of Jim Arness' 300th-plus episode of Gunsmoke. Although it struck me as remarkably similar to many another Gunsmoke scene I've watched over the years, there was little doubt that Jim Arness and Andy McLaglen, who's directed about 80 Gunsmokes, were trying diligently to make this one at least a little better than the last one.

THEY SHOT the scene at least three times, pausing between takes only for the sound of a small private airplane to fade away and for the contrails of a jet to dissipate into the California-Kansas sky. But except for such 20th Century harassments the cast and crew calmly, methodically, skillfully, and slowly created another piece for that complex and often contradictory mosaic that makes up the existing folklore about America's frontier West.



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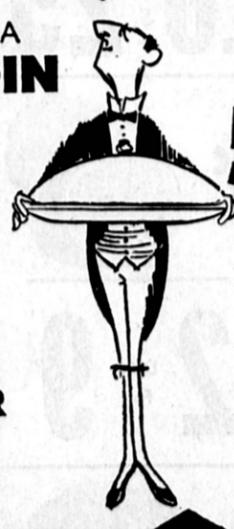
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STAR GAZER By CLAY R. POLLAN
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